

No. 3

**Recording Asia: “Cooperative Security” or  
Concert of Powers?**

**Amitav Acharya**

**Institute of Defence & Strategic Studies**  
email: [isacharya@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isacharya@ntu.edu.sg)

*With Compliments*

**Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies  
Singapore**

July 1999

### **IDSS Working Paper Series**

1. Vietnam-China Relations Since The End of The Cold War (1998)  
Ang Cheng Guan
2. Multilateral Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region: Prospects and Possibilities (1999)  
Desmond Ball
3. Recording Asia: “Cooperative Security” or Concert of Powers? (1999)  
Amitav Acharya
4. The South China Sea Dispute Re-visited (1999)  
Ang Cheng Guan
5. Continuity and Change in Malaysian Politics: Assessing the Buildup to the 1999-2000 General Elections (1999)  
Joseph Liow Chin Yong

The Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies was established in 1996 to:

- Conduct research on security and strategic issues pertinent to Singapore and the region.
- Provide general and post-graduate training in strategic studies, defence management, and defence technology.
- Promote joint and exchange programmes with other think tanks and organize seminars/conferences on issues salient to the strategic studies and policy communities of Asia Pacific.

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the prospects for a great power in the Asia Pacific region. It argues that while improved prospects for great power cooperation exist, especially in Northeast Asia, an Asian concert system will not resemble the classical European model. An Asian system will be issue-specific, sub-regional and fluid. Moreover, an Asian concert will be geared more to managing relations among the great powers than providing a joint approach to regional conflicts.

\*\*\*\*\*

Amitav Achaarya is Associate Professor of Political Science at York University, Toronto, Canada. He specializes in international relations of East and Southeast Asia. He was a visiting research fellow at IDSS during the 1998-99 academic year, and then became a Fellow of the Asia Centre at Harvard University (2000-01)

## Reordering Asia : ‘Cooperative Security’ or Concert of Powers?

### Introduction

Among the many ideas of proposals concerning security cooperation in the Asia Pacific region, one that has received little notice was a proposal in April 1998 by the Japanese Government calling for the region’s four major powers, the US, China, Japan, and Russia, to hold summit-level talks on regional security issues. On the eve of the visit by Russian President Boris Yeltsin to Tokyo, then Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto told reported that while the “idea is still not a concrete one... such a security summit would be a natural development.” He suggested the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum gathering as “the most suitable occasion for such a meeting”.<sup>1</sup>

The Japanese idea assumes significance against the backdrop of the 1998 annual report of its foreign ministry, released on 24 April 1998. Entitled “Japan’s Diplomacy Towards the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the report noted that during the past year, “the four major countries of the region – Japan, the United States, China and Russia, were engaged in diplomatic activity more positively than before.”<sup>2</sup> This is true at least judging by the unusually frequent pattern of bilateral summitry among these powers. These include Hashimoto’s visit to China in September 1997, Jiang’s trip to the US in October 1997, Yeltsin’s visit to China in November 1997, the Japan-Russia summit in Krasnoyarsk in November 1997, Yeltsin’s visit to Tokyo in April 1998, and Clinton’s visit to China in June 1998. Furthermore, on the heels of the last event, Japan announced the launching of a process of second-track level security talks among the US, China and Japan, which it hopes would lay the foundation of a “triangular” security relationship among the three powers. The timing of this announcement clearly reflected Tokyo’s apprehensions that a closer Sino-US relationship may be developing at its expense.<sup>3</sup> While it is easy to dismiss the importance of these developments, they may also suggest a possible new direction in great power diplomacy, which may at best compete with existing processes of multilateral activity and, at worst, undermine it. Since the early 1990s, much of the multilateral security dialogue and cooperation in the Asia Pacific region has been centred on the ASEAN Regional Forum

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward Neillan, ‘Four-Way Talks on Asian Security More than a Pipe Dream,’ *The Jakarta Post*, 24 April 1998

<sup>2</sup> ‘Japan Seeks Closer Big Powers Ties,’ *The Straits Times*, 25 April 1998, p.23

<sup>3</sup> ‘Japan, China, US to Hold Security Talks,’ *The Straits Times*, 5 July 1998, p.21

established in 1994. A notable feature of the ARF is the “leadership role” of the ASEAN, a sub-regional coalition of relatively politically weak states in Southeast Asia lacking strategic autonomy. While ASEAN has promised to take into consideration the concerns and interest of the great powers, it has claimed for itself the “driver’s seat” in organising and managing the ARF process. Yet, this apparent “bottom-up” approach to multilateralism will be threatened if the great powers are to organise their interactions outside of the ARF framework with a view to manage and influence the security and stability of the Asia Pacific region.

Is the Asia Pacific region witnessing the beginnings of a concert system? The notion of concert is relevant here not so much because there exists in the Asia Pacific region any realistic possibility of replicating the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Concert of Europe. For reasons discussed below, the classical post-Napoleonic concert of powers is not viable in Asia. But the concert is a useful analytic framework for assessing the possibilities and limits of great power cooperation which may evolve separately from the ASEAN-led ARF and which may have an important bearing on the latter. Even the most optimistic assessments of the ARF acknowledge the importance of the relations among the major powers in shaping regional order. Currently it is the ARF that is supposed to generate a constructive and predictable pattern of relations among the Asia Pacific nations, including the great powers. But the ARF does not exhaust the possibilities of security multilateralism. Moreover, if it fails to overcome the substantial scepticism that already exists about its future, then regional stability may come to depend critically on the prospect of some form of balancing as well as concerting behaviour among the major powers of the region.

The existing, if sparse, literature on an Asia Pacific concert remains divided as to whether it is a desirable or practical alternative to more inclusive multilateral institutions. Susan Shirk has advocated a concert system for the region, despite of the inevitable political problems it will create in securing acceptance from the lesser actors. She argues that a concert should not only regulate relations between the major powers, but also deal with conflicts between other regional states, preventing their escalation into a wider confrontation

involving the major powers.<sup>4</sup> Brian Job, outlining a whole range of cooperative relationships among the major powers, argues that even if a full-fledged and institutionalised concert is unlikely to emerge in the region, less formal patterns of cooperation, including “concerting behaviour” and “ad hoc consultations among major powers,” have already been evident.<sup>5</sup> Do the above-mentioned developments in great power relations suggest that the region is moving closer to such a framework? If so, what would be its implications for regional security and stability? Will it undermine existing multilateral security arrangements or complement it? These questions constitute the analytic focus of this paper.

### **The Idea of Concert**

The idea of concert as used in this paper has four inter-related aspects: (1) the relative primacy of great power relations vis-à-vis other relationships; (2) the “special responsibility” of great powers over security issues (3) “internal” balancing, involving the regulation of the relations among the great powers themselves; and (4) extra-mural cooperation, involving joint or collaborative management of other regional security issues.

These elements of a concert relationship and the idea of a concert of powers in general, derive from a well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century European arrangement.<sup>6</sup> It represented an attempt by the victorious great powers to assume the “primary responsibility” for managing Europe’s security problems following the defeat of Napoleon. The system worked particularly well between 1815 to 1823, but experienced a steady decline thereafter, (prompting, theoretical arguments regarding the durability of a concert approach in peacetime), suffering an eventual collapse with the Crimean War of 1854.

---

<sup>4</sup> Susan Shirk, ‘Asia Pacific Regional Security: Balance of Power or Concert of Powers?’, in David A.Lake and Patrick Morgan, eds. *Regional Orders: Building and Security in a New World* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 245-270.

<sup>5</sup> Brian L.Job, ‘A Matter of Delicate Diplomacy: Prospect for a concert of Power in the Asia Pacific,’ Paper presented at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Diego, USA, September 1996

<sup>6</sup> On the European concert, see: Richard Langhorne, *The Collapse of the Concert of Europe: International Politics, 1890-1914* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1981); F.R. Bridge and Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European States System 1815-1914* (London: Longman, 1980); Paul Schroeder, ‘The 19<sup>th</sup> Century International System: Changes in the Structure,’ *World Politics*, 34 (October 1986), pp. 1-25; Robert Jervis, ‘From Balance to Concert: A study of Security Cooperation.’ in Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, ‘Concerts, Collective Security’, *International Security*, vol 16. no. 1 (Summer 1991), pp 114-161

The European concert operated on the basis of four principles: (1) reliance on multilateral consultations among the great powers (conference diplomacy) to manage crisis situations; (2) an agreement that there could be no territorial change without great power approval; (3) a commitment to protect all “essential” members of the states system; and (4) a recognition that all the great powers must have equal status and that none should be humiliated.<sup>7</sup> It represented an attempt to “develop European solutions to European problems.”<sup>8</sup> While limited expectations of harmony, concert diplomacy nonetheless succeeded in enforcing a degree of self-restraint among the great powers.<sup>9</sup> Although the concert marked a new approach to European security, in reality, it was a more cooperative rendering of a balance of power system. As Benjamin Miller points out, the concert represented middle ground between the more idealistic notions of collective security and the extreme forms of balance of power.<sup>10</sup>

A concert of great powers...coordinates the maintenance of balance of power and jointly manages inter-states conflicts. A concert might even go beyond management and attempts to settle major disputes both among the great powers themselves and among third parties, especially those conflicts that could bring about involvement of the great powers. In this sense, a concert is more ambitious than the balance of power. The latter does not attempt to address the underlying issues in dispute, but only to deter, and to manage the balance of forces in such a way that there will be powerful disincentives for the use of force.<sup>11</sup>

Most countries of the Asia Pacific would find a framework for regulating great power competition to be a desirable and necessary element of regional order. But there are obvious problems in applying the classical concert model to Asia. First, if the European concert is any guide, then one can assume that concerts do not come about in peacetime. Rather, they emerge in the aftermath of a major power war in which a prospective

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Elrod, ‘The Concert of Europe: A Fresh Look at an International System,’ *World Politics*, 28 (January 1976), pp. 163-166.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Miller, ‘A New World Order’: From Balancing to Hegemony, Concert or Collective Security,’ *International Interactions*, vol 18, no. 1 (1992), pp. 1-33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

hegemonic power had been defeated by a rival coalition of great powers. Mearsheimer lists several reasons why a great power war may be a necessary backdrop to the emergence of concert: because the great powers have nothing more to gain by attacking each other: because the status quo is already advantageous to the victorious powers; because of the war-weariness of the great power; and because the cooperation which developed among the victorious great powers in defeating the potential hegemon tend to carry over into post-war years.<sup>12</sup> But there has been no great power war in Asia, which could provide the basis for a concert.

Second, the European concert established the principle that the great powers should enjoy “special status and privileges (but also the ‘responsibilities’)” in regulating international affairs.<sup>13</sup> In reality, the concert imposed a sort of great power “tutelage” over the rest of Europe.<sup>14</sup> In today’s world, this will be unacceptable. The Asia Pacific region’s weaker states, particularly South Korea and ASEAN, would oppose such dominance. ASEAN’s fear of any multilateral arrangement in which the great powers play a dominant role has led it to claim the “driver’s seat” in the ARF.<sup>15</sup> As Singapore’s Foreign Minister stated in July 1993, what ASEAN hope to develop through multilateralism is a “relationship among equals – a true partnership”.<sup>16</sup> A concert system which legitimises great power domination is not acceptable to it. While this may not stop the emergence of such a system, the political costs of developing it would be substantial enough for the great powers to refrain from attempting it.

Third, Patrick Morgan points out that the emergence of the European concert was “negatively motivated by a fear of war and revolution”, rather than by a positive affinity to a set of shared political values by the major powers.<sup>17</sup> In the Asia Pacific today, a shared interest in economic prosperity and hence in the avoidance of war which would undermine

---

<sup>12</sup> John Mearsheimer, ‘The False Promise of International Institutions,’ *International Security*, vol 19. No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp 35-36.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, ‘A New World Order,’ op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Elrod, ‘The Concert of Europe,’ op.cit., p. 164.

<sup>15</sup> Barry Buzan and Gerald Segal, ‘Rethinking East Asian Security,’ *Survival*, vol 36, no. 2 (Summer 1994), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *The Bangkok Post*, 27 July 1993, p.6

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Morgan, ‘Multilateralism and Security: Prospect in Europe’, in John Gerard Ruggie, ed., *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 335.



prosperity, may serve as the basis of a concert. But can a concert work on the basis of a limited degree of shared interests in the absence of shared values? As Philip Zelikow remind us, the European concert “ultimately foundered...because some powers had narrower goals – that is, the maintenance of territorial stability – while others had more expansive goals – such as the regulation of internal political affairs.”<sup>18</sup> Today, American goals in the Asia Pacific are more expansive than those of China, with the former’s concern with democratic enlargement seen as an ideological threat by the latter. Rosecrance argues that a modern concert requires not just participation by all major powers and renunciation of war and territorial expansion, but also ideological agreement, including an agreement on “giving liberal democracy and economic development first priority.”<sup>19</sup> But accepting liberal democracy as the foundation of regional order will automatically exclude China from a concert system. For an Asia Pacific concert to work, economic development has to be accepted as the primary element of an ideological consensus, and accepted as being prior to liberal democracy. But such an understanding may not be easily attainable.

Fourth, the co-ordinated power balancing that takes place within a concert can only be sustained as long as it does not violate great power interest. Mearsheimer notes that “when those great powers have a dispute, self-interest determines each side’s policy and the concert may collapse as a result.”<sup>20</sup> Today, the existence of serious territorial disputes among the major Asia Pacific powers reduces the likelihood of their engagement through a concert framework. Such disputes have prevented meaningful economic cooperation among the great powers, as between Japan and Russia over the Northern Territories. They provoke nationalist hysteria, as evident in the case of the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Daiyoutai islands. Apart from fuelling resentment and competition, these disputes can actually develop into military flashpoints. Despite their recent border treaty, a revival of Sino-Russian border disputes cannot be ruled out.

Finally, in the Asia Pacific region, unlike 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the basic question of who qualifies for great power status and who can legitimately and meaningfully belong to a

---

<sup>18</sup> Philip Zelikow, ‘The New Concert of Europe.’ *Survival*, vol 34, no. 2 (Summer 1992), p.45.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Rosecrance, ‘A New Concert of Powers,’ *Dialogue*, no. 101, 3/1993, reprinted from *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 71, no.2 (Spring 1992)

<sup>20</sup> John Mearsheimer, ‘The False Promise of International Institutions,’ *op. cit.*, p. 35

concert remain problematic. While Japan's foreign ministry suggested four such power, the US, Japan, China and Russia, Singapore's former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, has argued that the stability of the Asia Pacific region "still boils down to the relationship among the United States, Japan and China."<sup>21</sup> This is similar to the Chinese perspective, which does not see Russia as a major player in regional security as long as it remains inwardly focused and constrained by domestic political and economic crises. China's leaders and strategic thinkers are known to envisage even a more select group, consisting solely of itself and the US, as the guardians of regional order. With its decision to go nuclear, India too is already staking its claim to be a party to any great power security regime, a claim which, if India survives the current sanctions imposed by the West and Japan, would be difficult for the others to resist. It seems clear that the notion of concert in the Asia Pacific cannot be meaningful except on the basis of a flexible and adjustable membership.

Even as a concert system seems improbable in the current Asian political climate, the idea of great power leadership in managing security problems in the Asia Pacific region continues to have some resonance among the region's policy-makers. Indeed, concert-based solutions to the region's security problems predate the emergence of multilateral security institutions and dialogues. In 1987, then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had proposed the holding of talks between the US, the Soviet Union, Japan, China and India, on regional security issues.<sup>22</sup> His proposal fell on deaf ears, however due to suspicions that marked relations among the major powers in the Cold War setting. Another example of great power primacy in regional security affairs was the role of the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council to find a settlement to the Cambodia conflict during its final years. This effectively supplanted ASEAN's stewardship of the Cambodia peace process, prompting resentment and anger from the architects of ASEAN's Cambodia policy

---

<sup>21</sup> Interview by *Newsweek Magazine* with Lee Kuan Yew, reproduced in *The Straits Times*, 16 June 1998 p.33

## Concert and Multilateralism

In the early 1990s, “cooperative security” emerged as the main principle for organising multilateral security dialogues and cooperation among the Asia Pacific countries. This principle called for the avoidance of an explicit balance of power framework, including the rejection of “deterrence mind-sets” associated with great power geopolitics of the Cold War era. The notion of cooperative security emphasised “inclusiveness” and the equality of all the states. The institutional expression of cooperative security was the ASEAN Regional Forum. The ARF was to be based on the ASEAN model of consultations and consensus-building. The advent of the ARF meant that for the first time, a regional organization including all the major powers of the international system (the ARF’s members include the US, China, Russia, India and the EU, and Japan) would be “led” by a group of its weaker members.<sup>23</sup> The ARF concept thus turned the idea of concert on its head.

But the viability of this approach has been suspect from the start. To be sure, ASEAN’s leadership of the ARF offered important advantages. Without ASEAN sponsorship, Chinese participation in a regional multilateral security grouping would have been highly unlikely, ASEAN’s own norms and institutional style provided a ready-made foundation upon which the ARF could build itself. But keeping the ARF tied to the ASEAN framework also limits its relevance to security problems in Northeast Asia. Moreover, the “ASEAN way” of informal, slow-motion multilateralism tests the patience of the Western members of the ARF.

Since the inception, the ARF has adopted a multi-tier approach to security cooperation, consisting of confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and “elaboration of approaches to conflicts”. The confidence-building measures adopted during the first four years of its creation consist largely of information sharing on a voluntary basis and holding of meetings among regional defence officials. The idea of a regional arms register has been

---

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Asia Pacific Region: Cockpit for Superpower Rivalry’, *The World Today*, Vol. 43 Nos. 8-9 (August/September 1987), pp. 155-159

<sup>23</sup> On the origins and evolution of the ARF, see Amitav Acharya, ‘Making Multilateralism Work : The ASEAN Regional Forum and Security in the Asia Pacific,’ in *Multilateral Activities in Southeast Asia*, (Washington, D.C : National Defence University Press, 1996) Michael Leifer, *The ASEAN Regional Forum*, Adelphi paper no.302 (London : International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996)

abandoned; instead members are encouraged to participate in the UN conventional arms register. More ambitious CBMs such as advanced notification of military exercises have been stymied by Sino-US differences. Not unexpectedly, the US has rejected Chinese proposals for advance notification of joint military exercises conducted by countries outside their home territory ( this would obviously affect the US, the country with most such exercises, while sparing China). For its part, China has vehemently opposed any role of the ARF in preventive diplomacy on the ground that it may lead to outside interference in its “domestic” (including Taiwan) affairs. China in particular rejects any role for the ARF in conflict mediation and resolution. It prefers to keep the ARF primarily as a vehicle for dialogue and consultations, rather than binding security agreements or constraining measures. Thus, the advancement of the ARF’s security agenda remains hostage, among other factors, to continuing Sino-US differences. This in turn has raised questions about the ARF process’ ability to effectively regulate great power relations.

Moreover, the regional economic crisis and its attendant political effects have undermined ASEAN’s ability to provide leadership to the multilateral process. The ASEAN members not only have to focus on their domestic economic and political problems, but the grouping as a whole has also to cope with the burdens imposed by an expanded membership. Economic disparities between the old and new members, the international condemnation of its decision to grant membership to Burma, pressure to show results of its “constructive engagement” approach to Burma, and the political instability in Cambodia, are issues that seriously test ASEAN’s capacity to manage regional order in Southeast Asia. Asia Pacific multilateralism, including the APEC framework, has proved to be of little use to ASEAN in dealing with the economic crisis. The Asian economic crisis is also creating new security challenges for ASEAN members, including tensions over illegal cross-border migration, and political strains in Singapore-Indonesia and Singapore-Malaysia relations. Thus, the credibility of regional multilateral institutions in dealing with the region’s problems is at a low point.

The multilateral “cooperative security” approach underlying the ARF is also being challenged by the recent resurgence of some of the region’s traditional alliance mechanisms. The most important development is the reorientation of the US-Japan security alliance

towards “areas surrounding Japan”, which could cover regional crises in the Taiwan Straits and the South China Seas. US-Australia defence relations, especially joint exercises and training activities, have been strengthened under the John Howard government, with Canberra reasserting its traditional preference for a forward defence strategy over the “defence-in-depth” concept favoured in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many ASEAN members themselves have strengthened their defence links with the US, despite a professes commitment to defence self-reliance and multilateral security frameworks.

### **Concert and Great Power Bilateralism**

To be sure, the limitations of the ARF do not themselves mean that a concert of great powers is a more effective way of managing the region’s security dilemma. But they do invite attention to developments in great power relations which have moved parallel to the ARF and which might have opened up new avenues for ensuring Asia Pacific regional security.

Patrick Morgan points out a concert can contribute to regional security by fostering great power agreement to “mute and manage” their own conflicts, apart from providing a vehicle for them to cooperate to deal with other security issues.<sup>24</sup> Although great power interactions in the Asia Pacific region are predominantly bilateral in nature, a concert system, even one that is geared primarily to the management of the great power balance itself, need not be multilateral. It can consist of a series of overlapping and crosscutting bilateral relationships, which are positive, non-exclusionary and not directed against any member of the great power system. Neither does a concert need to be a formal, institutional arrangement. The European concert functioned without too much formalization and institutionalisation. As Elrod puts it, the concert remained “unwieldy”, depending “too much on the ‘good will’ of its members,” and the “personal dispositions of individual leaders.”<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Morgan, ‘Regional Security Complexes and Regional Order,’ in David A. Lake and Patrick Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders; Building Security in a New World* (University Park : the Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Elrod, op, cit., p. 169.

A concert does not require a perfectly harmonious relationship among the major powers. As Miller points out, the European concert was “ a mixed bag of competition and collaboration”. It permitted the great powers to cooperate in “maintaining the balance of forces and in managing international disputes”, while at the same time pursuing “their egotistic interests and compete with each other, albeit in a more restrained way than in a balance of power.”<sup>26</sup> Recent trends in great power relationships, especially the Sino-US relations, suggest precisely these sorts of possibilities. Take for example, the notion of a Sino-US “constructive strategic partnership” which emerged during Jiang Zemin’s visit to the US in October 1997. The meaning of this concept was not made clear, except that the two sides agreed to undertake dialogue and exchange of view on global and regional issues. Like a similar term used to describe Sino-Russian relationship, the Sino-US strategic partnership was not a call for an alliance, but for a security regime based on the principle of mutual restraint. It represented an effort to develop a more stable relationship partly induced by the 1996 Taiwan Straits crisis and by growing economic ties, which had seen US investments in China surpassing those in Japan. As a Japanese defence agency think-tank put it, “The mere increase of exchange and dialogue between leaders cannot lead to a quick resolution of disputes over such issues as human rights, Taiwan, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, trade deficits, and intellectual property rights.”<sup>27</sup> Nor has China stopped viewing US calls for democracy as an attempt to overthrow the communist regime through “peaceful evolution”. Yet, the clear indication was that the two sides would henceforth focus on the health of their overall relationship, while differing on specific issues.

In theory, the principles of “equal status” integral to concert diplomacy could prove useful in developing a more constructive Sino-US relationship. To be sure, the US and China have important ideological differences. The US ideology of liberal democracy is not acceptable to China, but a shared commitment to capitalist economic development already exists and it could serve as the basis of pursuing common security interests. A regional order could be built around the understanding that China and others could remain capitalist without necessarily being democratic, rather than having to accept capitalism with democracy, as being demanded by the US.

---

<sup>26</sup> Miller, p.10.

<sup>27</sup> *East Asian Strategic Review* 1997-1998 (Tokyo: The National Institute for Defence Studies, 1998) p.17.

But mere recognition of “equal status” is not a sufficient condition for concert diplomacy involving China and the US. The latter depends on the overall level of political trust and a shared interest in managing bilateral problems. The fragility of the Sino-US relationship has been amply demonstrated by several developments since the idea of a Sino-US “strategic partnership” emerged. The first was China’s loud and strong concerns about the US plans to deploy a Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) system in Northeast Asia, which China fears would cover Taiwan. But the real crunch in Sino-US ties came in the aftermath of the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in April 1999 and the unrelated but coincidental row over the US charges of Chinese espionage at US weapons laboratories. The former sparked rabid anti-US sentiments in China encouraged by the government, while the latter indicated the degree of anti-Chinese sentiments in the US congress. The chief casualty of these events was the so-called “strategic partnership” concept as China denied permission for US ship visits to Hong Kong and suspended military exchanges and trade talks with the US (which led the US Secretary of Defense to postpone his trip to China), pending the findings of US investigations into the bombing of its Belgrade embassy. The crisis reinforced the adversarial image that each side holds of each other; in China, the image of the US as a hegemonic bully was matched in the US by the perception of China as the major threat to its national security. The crisis indicated not only that a Sino-US concert would be fragile in dealing with bilateral problems, but also that such bilateral tensions would undermine their interest in managing wider regional and global issues.

Sino-Japanese relations have in the recent past experienced a number of setbacks, among them Japan’s stated concerns regarding Chinese military exercises in the Taiwan Straits. China’s demonstration of resolve to use force in the Taiwan Straits in 1996 remains a matter of concern for Japan, which in turn provokes Chinese anger. Chinese protests over the construction of a lighthouse in the Senkaku islands by a Japanese political group in 1996 highlights the potential of territorial disputes to disrupt bilateral ties. Similarly, China’s opposition to the visit to the Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Hashimoto in July 1996, the first such visit by a Japanese Prime Minister in 11 years attests to the continuing impact of the memory of Japanese aggression. These problems are compounded by China’s well-publicised suspicion that the Japan-US joint Declaration on Security, by paving the way for a reorientation of their alliance to wider regional security threats, amount to a de factor

containment posture vis-a-vis China. Ironically, however, Tokyo believes that Beijing places higher priority to its relations with the US than with Japan. Indicative of this is the fact that much of the Chinese criticism of the Japan-US defence guidelines has been aimed at Japan. At the same time, however, there have been efforts to improve the relationship. A summit held in the shadows of the APEC summit in the Philippines in November 1996 produced an agreement that the two leaders should make reciprocal visits to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalisation of their relations. In September 1997, during Hashimoto's visit to China, the two sides reached an agreement to hold an annual summit to be held alternately in China and Japan. Efforts at confidence building between the two militaries have continued, without leading to significant results as yet.

These developments underscore a contradiction inherent in any concert system that relies on a triangular relationship as its core element. As most countries of the Asia Pacific region recognise, the fate of an Asian concert depends on the smooth management of the US-China-Japan "strategic triangle". In a triangular setting, an attempt by any two sides to improve their bilateral relationship is likely to be perceived by the third as being at its own expense. Thus, the effort by the US and China to forge a strategic partnership is perceived negatively by Japan, while the move by the US and Japan to reaffirm their bilateral alliance is alarming to China. In a concert (which after all represents a minimalist form of cooperation based on coordinated balancing behaviour), states are more likely to emphasise their relative gain accruing from the improvement of a particular set of bilateral relationship than the absolute gain that comes from the overall improvement in the security climate.

In the early 1990s, large-scale sale of Russian defence equipment to Beijing was the key element of their bilateral ties. But the idea of a "strategic partnership", mooted in 1996, is in essence driven by "tactical" considerations including Russia's concerns regarding the expansion of NATO and Chinese fears concerning the strengthening of the US-Japan defence arrangements. An exclusive strategic partnership between the two is constrained by historic suspicions as well as by the fact that both China and Russia depend on the US and Japan for economic development. There has been substantial progress on border issues, especially with the signing of the Shanghai Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in 1996 and the accord on reduction of troops in border areas in the following year. These



agreements effectively permit China to redeploy its military resources to maritime conflict arenas, and are therefore a key factor in the balance of power in the Pacific. Moreover, they may not constrain the Sino-Russian rivalry in the long-term. The Indian nuclear testing dramatically revealed the fragility of bilateral CBM agreements among major powers, as India and China had signed a similar CBM agreement in December 1996.<sup>28</sup>

A marked improvement in Japan-Russia relations, especially in the political and military sphere, is another dimension of the evolving bilateral relationships among the major powers. In 1996, the Hashimoto government announced a new policy toward Russia based on three principles of trust, mutual benefit, and an “emphasis on long-term view”. At the Japan-Russia summit in November 1997 in Krasnoyarsk, the two sides agreed to strive for the conclusion of a peace treaty by the year 2000. Defence ties have improved with the visit by Russian Defence Minister Igor Rodinov to Tokyo.

In short, trends in the relationship among the four powers show a tendency to focus on the overall relationship, and to reduce its vulnerability to specific disputes or issues of contention. Notably, despite the current political rift over the bombing and the Cox report, the Chinese government, through its state-run newspaper, has relayed its willingness to have cooperative relations with the United States. The US, on its part, has shown a desire not to allow Chinese polemics to derail relations between the two countries. Washington is ready to resume exchanges between both countries on military, arms control and human rights, suspended by Beijing in the aftermath of the NATO embassy bombing. Second, the emphasis is on confidence building and dialogue; this remains the essence of the call for the so-called “strategic partnerships” in Sino-US and Sino-Russian relations. In a related vein, many of the initiatives for strengthening bilateral ties are in the nature of crisis management, aimed at tiding over immediate problems. Adjustments in relations have been “tactical” and problem solving, rather than strategic and transformative. At the same time, these bilateral dealings among the major powers of the Asia Pacific region have not had a pure zero-sum character, but have amounted to a “mixed bag of competition and collaboration”, which approximates pattern associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century European concert.

---

<sup>28</sup> For an analysis of the Sino-Russian (Shanghai Agreement) and Sino-India confidence-building efforts, see Amitav Acharya, *The ASEAN Regional Forum: Confidence-Building* (Ottawa: Department of Foreign Affairs

## **Managing Regional Issues: The Korean Peninsula and South Asia**

Overall, the major powers in the Asia Pacific today seem more concerned with managing their bilateral problems than developing a joint approach to regional order. Two issues are of particular relevance when considering the possibility of great power management of regional issues outside of their direct bilateral relationships. The first concerns the security of the Korean peninsula. Here, a framework focusing on great power management has evolved in the absence of viable multilateral alternatives at the broader regional or subregional levels. Northeast Asia has no equivalent of ASEAN. Institutionally based in Southeast Asia, and without North Korean membership (which has been opposed by the US), the ARF can only have a largely declaratory role in Northeast Asian affairs. Proposals to create a Northeast Asian security forum, mooted by South Korea in 1994 at the preparatory meeting of the ARF failed to take off because of opposition from North Korea, which believes that such a framework could be used by South Korea and its US ally to put pressure on itself. Bilateral channels are of limited value given the absence of diplomatic relations between the North and South, and the North and the US. Against this backdrop, the US found a “minilateral” approach as a necessary step towards dealing with the Korean peninsula issue to complement its existing and largely ad hoc bilateral dealings with the North. This took the form of four party talks involving North Korea, South Korea, the US and China initiated in 1996. But progress in this “on-again, off-again venture” has been marginal and does not support the claim that a bilateral concert approach involving the US and China could be effective in conflict management in Northeast Asia.<sup>29</sup> In the

---

and International Trade, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> In November 1996, the US and South Korea issued a proposal for four party talks between North and South Korea to be held along with the US and China. The proposal stemmed partly from South Korea’s failure to get the North to agree to direct bilateral dialogue to implement the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the South and the North (the Basic Agreement) signed by the two sides in December 1991. But the proposal elicited an ambiguous response from North Korea. At a briefing on four party talks sponsored by the US and South Korea in March 1997, Pyongyang demanded food aid from the US and South Korea as a precondition for its participation in any such multilateral framework. Subsequent efforts by the US and South Korea to provide humanitarian food aid through the UN and Red Cross to the North paved the way for three rounds of preparatory talks. Further complications arose during these sessions as a result of North Korea’s demand that the withdrawal of all US troops from the South and neighbouring areas be made a subject to be discussed in the four-party talks, although the first plenary round of the four-party talks did take place in Geneva in December 1997. Apart from Pyongyang’s attitude, the future of the four-party talks depend on Beijing. While China supports the idea after an initial passive attitude and scepticism regarding its feasibility, it also doubts whether such talks would produce any concrete results. China prefer to deal with North Korea through its own economic and military exchanges, thereby being guided by what a Japanese think-tank report calls a “sphere of influence” considerations, than through multilateral four-party talks, or channels such as KEDO. With North Korea showing a greater interest in the four-party talks,

meantime, the idea of a Northeast Asian Security Dialogue (NEASED), involving the US, Russia, China, Japan and the two Koreas has been proposed by President Kim Dae Jung of South Korea as an extension of the four-party talks. While eliciting a positive response from China, Japan and Russia, the six-party framework has not received an enthusiastic response from the US, which may be concerned that it would undermine US influence in Northeast Asian strategic affairs.

The second regional security issue where the role of great powers seems to be of considerable importance is nuclear proliferation in South Asia. To some extent, Sino-US relations (as well as Sino-US-Japanese relations) are marked by a growing convergence on proliferation management issues. The Clinton administration has claimed success in limited Chinese transfer of weapons of mass destruction to unfriendly states in the Middle East, and spared China of all but minor punishment for its recent transfer of nuclear and missile technology. The south Asian nuclear race poses the most serious test of this accommodation. The Clinton-Jiang summit in June 1998 produced a separate declaration on South Asian nuclear testing. It contained reference to the two countries' "shared interest" in South Asian stability and in a "strong global non-proliferation regime". Moreover, "as P-5 members, and as states with important relationships with the countries of the region", the two sides "recognize[d]...[their] responsibility to contribute actively" to peace and security issues in South Asia. Among other things, they agreed "stay closely in touch" on the South Asian situation, to maintain "close co-ordination" of policies and action in building international response to nuclear tests, and "to continue to work closely together" to prevent a nuclear and missile race in South Asia. They also offered to "assist, where possible, India and Pakistan to resolve peacefully" their disputes, including the Kashmir problem. The statement also mentioned a Sino-US agreement "to prevent the export of equipment, materials or technology that could in any way assist" India and Pakistan in developing nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles, and to strengthen the national export control systems of the US and China to this end.<sup>30</sup>

---

China too for a time seemed to warm to the idea, prompting suspicions that it would use its diplomatic relations with the two Koreas to maximize its influence in East Asia and enhance its bargaining and stature vis-à-vis the US. But China also seeks to ensure that the four-party talks do not undermine the existence of the North Korean regime. But progress in the four-party talks has been unimpressive, and the process seemed to have run out of steam by mid – 1999.

<sup>30</sup> 'Sino-US Presidential Joint Statement on South Asia', *The China Daily*, 28 June 1998.

The Indian response to this declaration was predictably hostile. The BJP government noted the “irony” that “the two countries have directly or indirectly contributed to the unabated proliferation of nuclear weapons and delivery systems in our neighbourhood are now presuming to prescribe norms for non-proliferation.” Moreover, India “categorically reject[ed] the notion of these countries arrogating to themselves joint or individual responsibility for the maintenance of peace, stability and security in the region.”<sup>31</sup> It is unlikely that India will be responsive to any Sino-US initiatives on this issue. Neither is India likely to accept UN or P-5 mediation on Kashmir. It is also doubtful that despite the pledge contained in the Sino-US statement, China will stop military cooperation with the Pakistan. Moreover, other nuclear powers in Asia, Russia, which have not imposed sanctions against India and Pakistan, are unlikely to join in any such effort on proliferation management. The partial lifting of US sanctions on India and Pakistan and the direct bilateral dialogues between the US and the BJP government (which worried Beijing) indicated that Washington did not have much faith in developing a credible approach to the South Asia nuclear in partnership with China. The crisis in Sino-US relations over Kosovo and nuclear espionage issues has rendered cooperation between the two on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction even less likely.

Thus, a concert approach will be of limited value in dealing with nuclear proliferation in South Asia. It is even less relevant to the search for a settlement of regional dispute in the South China Sea. There has been little effort among recent great power meetings to deal with this issue. A concert will also not be acceptable to China as a framework for managing another regional security challenge, the Taiwan issue. Indeed, this may account for the cautious attitude of China towards the idea of a great power concert.

While differences in perspective and policy among the Asia Pacific powers over contemporary regional security issues abound, there remain certain areas of convergence. These include rejection of European-style multilateral security institutions. Both the US and China expressed deep reservations about initial proposals for a CSCE-type security organisation for the Asia Pacific, albeit for different reasons. The US feared that such an institution would undermine its bilateral alliances, while China was concerned that it would

---

<sup>31</sup> ‘India Slams Call Not to Deploy N-arms,’ The Straits Times, 29 June 1998, p.13.

develop into an anti-China bandwagon. But underlying their rejections was a classic dilemma of great powers in dealing multilaterally with lesser states.

While both China and the US have been more welcoming of the ARF, China opposes ARF's role in dispute-settlement or conflict resolution, while the US essentially sees the ARF as an adjunct to its military umbrella. Japan's attitude is shaped by, and parallels, the US position. Together, the attitudes of US, Japan and China towards multilateralism differ from that of the middle powers such as Australia and Canada, who advocate speedier development of more institutionalised mechanisms for security cooperation.

It should be recognised, however, that China's preference for bilateralism mainly concerns bilateral modes of confidence building (as reflected in its CBM treaties with India, Russia and the Central Asian republics) and dispute settlement (in the case of the South China Sea dispute). It naturally opposes the strengthening of America's bilateral alliances. The US prefers bilateralism mainly in its defence relations, and welcomes multilateral defence cooperation as well as conflict resolution as long as they do not undermine the former.

While all the four major powers of the Asia Pacific may have a shared interest in developing a concert relationship, their individual motivations differ. Russia has most to gain from a four-power relationship, which will provide it with enhanced status and a managerial role that it currently lacks. Japan, the most enthusiastic supporter of four-power talks is clearly driven by its fear of being sidelined in a possible strategic relationship between the US and China. In the case of the US, support for a concert-style "minilateralism" has been evident since the Bush administration preferred "a la carte" multilateralism (ad hoc multilateral approaches to specific regional issues by the most concerned actors) while opposing a CSCE-type framework as a more practical approach to regional security issues, such as the Korean Peninsula conflict.

By openly soliciting China's help in managing Asia Pacific security issues, as evident during the Clinton visit to China in June 1998, the US may have legitimised, perhaps unwittingly, great power primacy in maintaining regional order. In contrast, the ARF was

hardly mentioned during the Sino-US summit. The US also highlighted the “leadership” shown by China in not devaluing its currency. But the importance of these pronouncements can be overstated. They were inspired to some extent by the administration’s need for calming domestic criticism of its China policy. The US interest in seeking China’s cooperation on regional security issues is but an attempt to constrain China’s policies and preempt Chinese actions that would undermine US strategic objectives. They do not mean that the US would adopt solutions to regional security problems along the lines preferred by Beijing. China’s help is important to the US mainly because Beijing retains the ability to undermine and spoil American approaches to several vital regional security problems. This is the essence of the US perception of China as a “co-manager” of regional security issues.

Officially, China rejects the idea of a great power concert, not the least because of the apparent tensions between this concept and China’s “anti-hegemony” posture originally developed during the Cold War years. But it also agrees, as noted earlier, that “building multilateral regional cooperation will not be possible without first developing co-operative relations between and among the major powers in the region.”<sup>32</sup> This suggests, at least, that China favours a “concert-based” multilateralism, even though it supports ASEAN’s leadership of the ARF at the declaratory level. It is not surprising that Beijing has apparently agreed to “seriously” consider four-power talks on regional security.<sup>33</sup> China’s Vice-President, Hu Jintao, has been quoted by media reports with the following statement: “Four-way talks have already been on the table at private levels.”<sup>34</sup> We are now considering such talks at government levels.” Informal concerting not only suits China’s quest for enhanced international status, it also reduces China’s fear that ARF-style multilateralism could become a way for smaller powers to gang up against itself.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusions

---

<sup>32</sup> Banning Garrett and Bonnie Glaser, “Multilateral Security in the Asia-Pacific Region and its Impact on Chinese Interest: Views from Beijing”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol 16. No. 1 (June 1994), p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Japan Seeks Closer Big Power Ties’, *The Straits Times*, 25 April 1998. p.23

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> On the importance of status to China, see Jianwei Wang, ‘Coping with China as a Rising Power’ in James Shinn, ed, *Weaving the Net: Conditional Engagement of China* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations

The foregoing analysis leads to several general observations concerning the prospects for a concert of powers in the Asia Pacific region.

First, the notion of concert is meaningful in the Asia Pacific region more as a framework for moderating the rivalry between the major powers themselves than in developing a joint approach on their part to other regional issues. But there are limits to the extent to which the two aspects can be delinked from one another. Differences over the latter may undermine efforts to develop a more cooperative bilateral relationship among the major powers.

If an Asian concert is to emerge, it will not resemble the classic 19<sup>th</sup> century European variety. Despite the recent proposals by Japan, the best prospects for the regulation of great power competition in Asia are through cross-cutting bilateral channels, with occasional resort to ad hoc multilateral consultations among them. Some of these bilateral relationships may complement each other, while others would be competitive. Thus, the notion of a concert, if it is to be applicable to the Asia Pacific region at all, has to be seen at best as a set of overlapping bilateral relationships that reduces tensions in great power relations. While this, in turn, may create the basis of complementary policies towards regional conflicts, it would have a limited value in promoting the joint management of regional conflicts.

Third, a concert approach is likely to be more relevant in managing security issues in Northeast Asia than Southeast Asia or South Asia. This calls for a more differentiated understanding of the Asia Pacific as a regional security complex. Southeast Asian issues are less central to great power relations and will continue to be managed through existing frameworks such as ASEAN. In South Asia, a concert approach involving the US, China and Japan may produce declaratory commitments, and some complementary parallel measures. But a collective great power response will not work because it will not recognise India as a member of the great power club.

---

Press, 1996), p.17. Wang argues for making China a member of the G-7 (now G-8) so as to convey “a signal to Beijing that Western countries treat China as an important and equal partner”

Fourth any concert-type system in Asia Pacific cannot be an all-purpose framework, but issue-specific. Nuclear proliferation is perhaps the issue most amenable to a concert-based approach. This has already happened in the Korean peninsula and may be developing to a more limited degree in relation in South Asia. On the opposite end is the management of territorial disputes, including those involving the major powers. These will remain bilateral in nature and continue to be handled through bilateral channels.

Given the fact that the more inclusive multilateral security institutions in the Asia Pacific are likely to remain weak and ineffectual at least for the foreseeable future, the major powers in the Asia Pacific region are unlikely to forsake some type of balancing and coordinating behaviour outside of the wider multilateral context. China, despite its declaratory opposition to the idea of concert, is quite amenable to concert-based multilateralism. The US has supported ad hoc concert-based solutions to specific regional security issues. Japan advocates a concert-like consultative mechanism. Russia will be interested in any and all of these ideas if invited to participate.

Moreover, in the Asia Pacific region, while a concert system involving a formal managerial role by the great powers “over and above” the ARF, is unacceptable to the region’s lesser powers, this does not negate a somewhat different understanding of concert, one that acknowledges the vital importance of great power relations for regional security and prosperity. Moreover, some of the principles of concert diplomacy, such as a commitment by all the major powers to avoidance of ideology-based foreign policy postures, to renunciation of war and territorial expansion, and regular consultations on security problems, would remain relevant in regulating the relationships among the great powers.<sup>36</sup>

But the key question is whether a security order that accepts the primacy of great power interactions will undermine the relevance of existing multilateral security dialogues and confidence-building processes. If it operates primarily as a consultative mechanism, a concert can be helpful in addressing certain type of security goals, such as proliferation management and in reducing tensions in great power interaction, while the ARF remains a

---

<sup>36</sup> Amitav Acharya, ‘A Concert of Powers in the Asia Pacific’, in Derek Da Cunha ed., *The Evolving Pacific Power Balance* (Singapore Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 63-69



more useful framework of general confidence-building and preventive diplomacy efforts. This sort of a division-of-labour between the two frameworks may be the best hope for preventing great power dominance (in both its competitive and collaborative forms) from overwhelming the ARF.